

The Rushmore Estate, the Shire Rack and the Dorset County Boundary Group

The Rushmore Estate is traversed by the western end of the Shire Rack which follows the Dorset/Wiltshire county boundary. Before the Normans counties were known as shires and the Shire Rack presents a name in Old English *racu* implying a 'reach' a 'hollow pathway' which follows what we are given to understand was an agreed border between the two shires which could be 'perambulated,' one of the few lengths today remaining a public footpath. The word 'shire' is from the Old English word 'to shear,' 'to cut' thence to connote a formally defined district, a province. The first mention of the 'shires' is found in the late seventh century Law Code of King Ine of Wessex. The office of county sheriff, 'shire reeve,' survives to this day.

Before scale-mapping estates were defined by written boundary recitals. We are fortunate to find this length of boundary recorded in two Anglo-Saxon charters granting estates to two Benedictine nunneries sited on either side of the Shire Rack. On the north side the Chalke estate was granted to Wilton Abbey in AD 955 and a year later in AD 966 the Handley estate was granted to Shaftesbury Abbey. Their overlapping boundary clauses assist in identifying landmarks along the Shire Rack, those already in existence by the tenth century.

The Shire Rack is of historical important in the widest sense presenting not only manmade features which invite investigation, not least the *miclan byrg* 'big enclosure' today's Mistleberry Camp, but veteran tree stools and rows of formerly coppiced hazels; boundaries were once carefully managed as what we might perhaps describe as 'linear woodland.'

This tract of country was one to formerly witness cross-border movement, herding and trading, and evidence presents here for early shire 'border controls' in those tenth-century 'gate' names we find along the Shire Rack where tolls could be levied. These major crossing points present archaeological potential which will be assisted by the wider planned LIDAR survey by the Cranborne Chase AONB. Shermel Gate is of particular interest since many tracks once converged here and until 1885 Fifield Bavant parish extended this far south and so gaining direct access to the Gate. 'Shermel' suggests the site of a large wayside cross, a 'shire *mael*' on the borders of two ecclesiastical estates. The same charters enable us to track the probable route of an Anglo-Saxon *herepath*, military road, crossing Handley and Berwick St John, and possibly passing via Higher Bridmore Farm

We still seek explanations for further aspects of the Shire Rack: When and how did it become defaced and its surface quite invisible where it crosses Minchington Down to Ferney Way? When was it diverted around area of the Walled Garden – the Tithe Map shows it in 1841, but so does the Thomas Aldwell map of 1618? What was the origin of Sessions Gate – was this another toll point? We know quite a lot about the customs and keepership of The Chase going back to the time of Richard III, but we know little about the shire/county boundary.

The Dorset County Boundary Survey has attracted a wide range of expertise, archaeology, botany, cartography, history, and has been exploring lengths of the boundary since 2006. We have an agreed boundary recording methodology – one with a wide application – each of our detailed record forms as completed is filed in the Dorset History Centre, papers published in the *Dorset Proceedings*, and the project has attracted wide interest in our occasional Day Schools. National publication of the project – the first of its kind – is now in process with the Society for Landscape Studies.

No one knows how old shire/county boundaries are; the 'shire' designation presented by the Shire Rack may suggest a making (or re-making) of an agreed, well-defined border between the *Dorsetaetan* and *Wiltsetan*, Dorset and Wiltshire peoples, dating to the later seventh century.

The Shire Rack crosses the designated area of the AONB, their current Historic Landscape Partnership project is one to present potential for the first-ever conservation, management and way-marking of this historic length of county boundary. We were invited to mount a display in the AONB marquee at the recent Chalke Valley History Festival and which attracted a lot of interest.

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